

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Testimony of
Brenda Donald Walker,
Nominee for Appointment as Director, Child and Family Services Agency
before the Committee on Human Services
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Good morning Chairwoman Allen, members of the Committee on Human Services, and distinguished guests. I am Brenda Donald Walker, and I am honored to appear before you as the Mayor's nominee for director of the DC Child and Family Services Agency.

I am deeply grateful to Mayor Williams for his unwavering commitment to CFSA and for his confidence in my ability to lead the agency. On a personal note, I also deeply appreciate you, Chairwoman Allen, for your passion, commitment, and leadership in improving the lives of the city's most vulnerable children and families. You have been very supportive of CFSA and will be greatly missed.

CFSA is the District's safety net for abused and neglected children. Our mandate is to keep children safe, improve their well being, and ensure they grow up in permanent homes. In this, we have an awesome responsibility and, if we do our job well, a tremendous opportunity to improve outcomes for thousands of children and families in our city.

In round numbers, CFSA is currently serving 5,800 children. Of these, nearly 2,800 are in out-of-home care, and a little over 3,000 children are receiving in-home services and supports. Almost all--92 %--are African American. They come from all wards of the city, with the majority coming from Wards 5, 6, 7 and 8. A needs assessment that we conducted last year revealed some startling facts about the issues and obstacles our client families face. The typical parent on our caseload is a single mother, average age 31, with four children under age 18 in the home. In addition . . .

- 96 percent of these mothers are unmarried,
- 73 percent are unemployed outside the home,
- 52 percent are not high school graduates, and
- 25 percent were homeless or living in a shelter before becoming involved with CFSA.

Clearly, these families desperately need the safety net CFSA is working so hard to provide.

As you know, I served as chief of staff under CFSA Director Olivia Golden, who put in place many of the important building blocks of the District's first cabinet-level child welfare agency. I'm sure everyone in this room will agree that CFSA was in a very different place three-and-a-half years ago, just as I am sure that many doubted we could accomplish as much as we have so far. In three years, we have:

- Overcome the chronic understaffing of social workers to bring caseloads down to an average of 17 per worker.
- Moved from limited legal representation of children in court to full representation the Assistant Attorneys General co-located at CFSA.
- Established a top-notch in-house training academy.

- We have also put in a place a strong, talented management team all of whom, I'm proud to say have signed on to stay as part of my team.
- Made vast improvements in the scope and reliability of our management information system.
- Licensed all District-based group homes and independent living programs serving our youth.

By all accounts, the District's safety net for children and families has never been stronger, but it is not yet strong enough to be fully effective. If we are successful in meeting the requirements of the court-ordered Implementation Plan, the city's child welfare system will be able to shed court oversight in early 2007.

I am grateful to Dr. Golden for her leadership and her confidence in my ability to continue CFSA's forward momentum. I willingly took the baton in the middle of a fast-paced race that feels like a sprint but is really a marathon. It's a long road to establishing an effective child welfare system in the District, and while we have traveled far in the last three years, we still have a long way to go. I use the term "child welfare **system**" with great purpose. While CFSA is directly accountable for court-ordered performance goals, we do not act alone. Serving abused and neglected children and troubled families demands the skill, commitment, and collaboration of a host of others including other District agencies, the Family Court, neighborhood Collaboratives, foster parents, and providers. Collectively, we are the safety net.

To lead the way, my goal is to make CFSA a model child welfare agency that puts children first. For me, this challenge is personal. I grew up in Ward 8, a product of a so-called broken home, and I attended some of the same schools and lived in some of the same neighborhoods as many of CFSA's children and families. I was lucky to be blessed with a strong, loving mother who put her children first and made us believe in ourselves. Our family also benefited from a cohesive community that regarded all children in the neighborhood as family—an informal safety net, if you will. Things are different now, and many of the families we serve are overwhelmed by poverty, substance abuse, and hopelessness. Still, I believe these families want the same thing we all want: happy, healthy, successful children.

My values are based on social justice and equity, both of which are reflected in my career of over 25 years in the public and nonprofit sectors. For ten years, I held various management positions with the City of Little Rock, Arkansas, ultimately serving as assistant city manager. My responsibilities included finance, personnel, job training, cable television, and youth programs. I left Little Rock after being selected as a fellow in the Children and Families Fellowship program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, where I focused on university-community partnerships and the role of local government in community building. After returning to the District, I served for five years as vice president for Municipal Programs at DC Agenda, where I created the Cafritz Awards for distinguished District government employees and assisted in developing the Center for Excellence in Municipal Management at George Washington University. I also managed DC Agenda's work with the Healthy Families/Thriving Community Collaboratives and helped to establish the citywide Collaborative Council. I left DC Agenda to join CFSA's new

management team and served as chief of staff for nearly three years before being named interim director.

Since stepping into the role of director last April, I have identified priorities and defined an agenda based on three overarching themes:

- 1) Improving Practice,**
- 2) Improving Management, and**
- 3) Achieving Better Outcomes for Children and Families.**

Improving Practice

The first phase of CFSA's reform demanded laying a foundation and establishing key structural supports. Now, our challenge is to improve front-line practice, with emphasis on conducting efficient, quality investigations; increasing social worker visits to children; and obtaining better placement options.

Investigations. Intake is the gateway to the child protective system, with CFSA's hotline being the initial point of entry. Each month, we get approximately 700 calls to our hotline, resulting in roughly 400 new investigations. In an average month, 50% of our investigations are for neglect, 36% for physical abuse, and 14 % for sexual abuse. The Implementation Plan requires that we initiate all investigations within 24 hours and complete them within 30 days, a standard we have not yet achieved.

When I took over as interim director, we had an unacceptably large backlog of incomplete investigations due to staffing shortages, inadequate training, low morale, and weak business processes. In addition, the Intake & Investigations administrator position had been vacant for six months. I immediately revamped the backlog action plan, hired a highly regarded child welfare consultant as a temporary administrator, and installed an interim management team to address the backlog and develop new business processes. In September, we hired a permanent administrator who has over 25 years of child welfare experience, and she is moving quickly to implement new business processes and other management changes to improve the quality of our investigations. The original backlog has been virtually eliminated, and we are working diligently to ensure that new cases are investigated within the required time frame. We still have a ways to go in putting Intake on firm footing. It will continue to be a top priority over the next few months.

Intake is also the portal for our newest practice initiative: Family Team Meetings. Training conducted by outside experts and scheduled to begin this month will prepare CFSA, Family Court, the Collaboratives, and our other partners to implement this state-of-the-art approach. Its goals include giving parents and extended family members a voice in decision making about their situation, building on family strengths, and thus engaging both family and professional resources in the best interests of children. In other jurisdictions, Family Team Meetings have contributed to reducing the number of children who come into the system, as well as reducing the number of placement changes.

Visits. When the District's child welfare program came out of receivership, records showed that only 3% of clients were being visited each month. Now that social workers have manageable caseloads, cars, cell phones, and (soon) laptop computers, the expectation is that they visit their clients regularly, maintain current case plans, and be well prepared for court hearings. In addition to increasing the frequency of visits, we are retraining workers about the purpose of visits—what to look for, what findings constitute risks, and how to assess a family situation in the overall context of child safety and well-being.

At the end of September, we met the Implementation Plan benchmark of regular visits to 75% of children in foster care, but we were still below the mark for in-home and sibling visits. We have a number of strategies for improving performance in regard to visits, with perhaps the most important being a clearly articulated emphasis on accountability from the top down.

Thanks to CFSA's sophisticated management information system, FACES, managers and workers alike have real-time access to hundreds of management reports that drill all the way down to the front-line worker. For example, we know exactly how many children have not had a visit in the last 30 days and which children do not have a current case plan. These reports can be organized by worker, supervisor, on up the chain of command. Supervisors use these reports to zero in on social workers not performing up to standard and to develop performance improvement plans when necessary. The reports are also useful in identifying trends and gaps in services to determine how and where to shift resources—and in identifying outstanding social worker performance.

Placements. Of the approximately 2,800 children in out-of-home placements; 58% are in traditional foster homes; 21% are in kinship care; 14% are in congregate care, which includes group homes and independent living facilities; and 7% are in residential treatment or long-term care facilities. About half of our foster children are in Maryland, partly a result of kinship or extended family ties but also due to limited foster family resources in the central city. Simply put, demand for appropriate placements for foster children exceeds supply, especially for therapeutic or “high end” children, teen parents, adolescents, and older youth. This challenge is not unique to DC, and we are fortunate to have partnerships to assist in addressing our placement needs.

Our most important partners are our resource parents themselves, the foster, adoptive, and kinship parents who take care of our children. Over the last three years, we have worked hard to strengthen our relationship with our resource parents, enlisting them as true partners in policy development and problem solving and paying attention to their needs and concerns. Foster parent recruitment and retention is one of our strategic goals, and we are fortunate that Congress agreed to invest resources with the Council of Governments and the Foster Parent Advocacy Center to support our efforts in this area. CFSA has developed a strategic foster and adoptive recruitment plan that serves as the framework for our collective efforts to recruit and retain resource parents. However, the complexity of our placement issues and ever changing dynamics of our client population mean placement will continue to be a front-and-center issue for some time.

Improving Management

Thanks to the Mayor's leadership and the Council's support, CFSA has been afforded the necessary financial resources to serve our clients in accordance with Implementation Plan requirements. I am well aware of the caveats the Council put on CFSA's FY05 budget and of the insistence on better management and accountability. I do not shy away from fiscal accountability; in fact, it is a basic component of my management style.

Immediately after being named interim director, I established CFSA's first Budget Management Team and required all senior managers to identify cost-saving recommendations. As a result, I received dozens of recommendations ranging from simple budget efficiencies to ambitious revenue generating measures. The Budget Management Team is reviewing the feasibility of these recommendations, and I will implement those ideas that are both doable and likely to have impact. I am also requiring every member of my senior staff to include one or more cost savings measures in their FY05 performance management plans. Managers will also be responsible, for the first time, for managing their own budgets, including overtime, resource utilization, and contract monitoring.

In addition to cost savings and other budget efficiencies, I will aggressively seek additional federal and private funding for CFSA. Although the agency has significantly increased its federal revenues over the past three years, I am convinced that we can achieve even greater returns by being more diligent and creative and by tightening our business processes. I have formed a team consisting of CFSA's Chief Financial Office representatives, the Deputy Mayor's

Medicaid Officer, and the Budget Management Team to explore the feasibility of establishing an internal business services unit that will report directly to my office. We are seeking advice from child welfare leaders and other experts to launch an efficient, effective revenue maximization operation, as some of the best child welfare agencies in the country have done.

I have also just established a Resource Development Office to work strategically with other District government agencies to maximize resources and avoid duplication of services, particularly since we serve many of the same families. This office will also work closely with CFSA Volunteer Services to pursue foundation funding, corporate partnerships, and federal grant opportunities. CFSA has also been in discussion with several funders and a major corporation to establish a nonprofit fund to attract corporate and private donations for foster children. Similar funds operating in New York and other states have generated millions of dollars to pay for goods and services that enrich the lives of foster children, including summer camps, enrichment programs, travel, college fees, and court-ordered services that we currently pay for with public dollars. It is my goal to have this fund in place this fiscal year.

Achieving Better Outcomes

Underneath all the lofty goals and court-ordered mandates, CFSA's mission is to protect children and to help make their lives better. Safety is immediate and paramount, but we must then focus on long-term outcomes critical to improving a child's life.

Permanence. In fiscal year 2005, CFSA finalized a record 410 adoptions and 244 legal guardianships. This is cause for celebration, but it must be tempered with the reality that an

additional 859 children are still waiting to be adopted. Of these, 498 are in pre-adoptive homes, and we are diligently streamlining our business processes to move these children to permanent homes within the time frames federal and District laws require.

We have a number of challenges to overcome on behalf of our children still waiting to be adopted. These stem from no sense of urgency about permanence historically throughout the system; lack of family involvement; inadequate business processes; and an insufficient number of adoptive families, particularly for older and handicapped children. In addition, the District adheres to the practice of waiting to terminate parental rights until an adoptive family has been identified and a petition filed for a particular child. While this stems from a reluctance to create legal orphans, it also leads to unintended consequences, such as confusing children and birth parents, deterring prospective adoptive parents, and prolonging the time children wait for permanent homes. We are working closely with the Attorney General and Family Court to streamline our local adoption processes. We also expect to increase public awareness and the number of people coming forward to adopt as a result of the improved recruitment activities I mentioned earlier.

Mental Health Services. Not surprisingly, many of our children need mental health services to overcome the trauma of being abused and neglected. CFSA has entered into a partnership with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to not only ensure quality of care, but also continuity of mental health services. CFSA has linked approximately 95% of all mental health referrals through DMH's access help line, which in turn links the child and family to a service provider.

Through the FY 2004 special appropriations from Congress, we are working together to enhance mental and behavioral health services to children. We have been able to provide several new innovative practices, including mobile response and stabilization services; intensive home and community based services; and multisystemic therapy services for high-end children.

Health Care. CFSA has worked hard over the last year to enhance health care services to children in our care. CFSA currently has a contract with Children's Hospital to coordinate health services under the DC Kids Program. The contract includes conducting a pre-placement medical screening for all children coming into care. Within 30 days of a child coming into care, each child receives an EPSDT (Early Periodic Screening Diagnosis Treatment) evaluation which allows us to obtain a baseline medical status and develop a treatment plan to address the needs of the child. Additionally, Children's is responsible for making provisions for children to have ongoing comprehensive medical and behavioral evaluations and maintaining all medical information on children in CFSA's care.

We will issue a new RFP for health care this Fall to seek expanded health care services, including provisions for 24 hour screenings, full evaluations within 30 days to include dental, vision, behavioral, speech and language screenings.

Older Youth. As of September 30, 53 percent of CFSA's children were between age 12 and 21, with almost one-third 16 or older. Many of these older youth have grown up in our system, largely a result of years of bad child welfare practice and the legacy of the crack cocaine epidemic of the late 1980s and early '90s. I believe we have a special obligation to these

children. Although we still pursue permanency for our older children, and 91 were adopted last fiscal year, the reality is that most of our older children are on the independent living track. I have elevated the agency's focus on our older youth because we have a moral obligation to prepare these young people for life on their own. After all, when they leave our system at age 21, there will be no safety net. National studies have shown that former foster youth are more likely to be homeless, unemployed, and involved in the criminal justice system than any other subpopulation. We have an opportunity to change those odds by planning earlier and investing more strategically in the well being of our older youth.

I am working closely with CFSA's independent living program, the Center for Keys for Life, to develop strategies for putting more youth on the college track and supporting them while in college. We are working on a plan to provide every youth in college with a mentor who will not only be supportive and encouraging but will also secure summer internships and relevant work experience so that the student will have a marketable resume upon graduation. We are also working with the Collaboratives and housing advocates to develop strategies for securing housing for youth well in advance of their emancipation date.

Another focus is on teen parents, many of whom became parents under our watch. My goal is to invest in these young parents by teaching parenting skills and providing other supports so that the cycle of abuse and neglect is not perpetuated, as it so often is. We also need a citywide strategy, including the courts, juvenile justice system, schools, and community groups, to focus on the so-called disconnected youth, those who have dropped out of school and may also be on the run.

Conclusion

Although Mayor Williams reclaimed child welfare from court receivership amidst considerable skepticism that the city could do the job, child welfare reform in the District is well underway. Our collective goal now must be to continue improving system-wide performance and building that strong safety net all of us envision and that our children need and deserve. Leading this initiative is difficult, challenging, and crucial work with high stakes and real consequences.

This morning, I hope I have assured you that I take this important responsibility seriously. Professionally, I feel as if all my experience in public and community service has led to this point where I can direct CFSA and join with our many partners to make a real and lasting difference in this community. In addition to being professionally prepared, I am also personally engaged and enthusiastic. I face this opportunity with vision, knowledge, pragmatism, humility, excitement, and hope. I respectfully ask for your confirmation. Thank you.